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Strong and Weak Forms of Mediatization Theory

A Critical Review

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Abstract

During recent years, the concept of mediatization has made a strong impact on media and communication studies, and its advocates have attempted to turn it into a refined and central theoretical framework for media research. The present article distinguishes two forms of mediatization theory: a strong form based on the assumption that a 'media logic' increasingly determines the actions of different social institutions and groups, and a weak form that questions such a logic, though the latter form emphasizes the key role of the media in social change and singles out mediatization as a central 'meta-process' today. Exponents of the weak form have convincingly criticized the notion of media logic. However, the weaker version of mediatization is itself problematic, as its advocates have failed to produce a clear explanatory framework around the concept. We argue that, although the analytical status of mediatization is unclear, fascination with the concept will, in all probability, continue in the years to come, due to the promises of heightened disciplinary coherence and status that this notion has conveyed for media and communication studies.

Keywords: media logic, media studies, theory, critique, disciplinary identity, research funding

Introduction

'Mediatization' has become a distinctive problematic in media research during recent years, with numerous conferences, seminar groups, books, articles and case studies devoted to the subject. Although mediatization was used sporadically in different forms and contexts in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Asp 1986; Thompson 1995; Somerville 1997; Mazzoleni and Schultz 1999), today it has been named a "key concept" (Lundby 2009) through which media researchers try to understand the importance of media to society and culture. According to Adolf (2011: 155), "the notion of mediatization has recently become part of a high-profile, international exchange". The term has been particularly popular in the Nordic countries, Germany and Central Europe. In the English-speaking world, this somewhat "clumsy neologism" (Livingstone 2009: 6) has also aroused considerable interest, although there have been discussions on whether 'mediation' should be used instead of mediatization (e.g., Silverstone 2005). However, mediatization has come to be increasingly accepted. Couldry, who was originally skeptical of the concept and preferred "mediation" (Couldry 2008), now argues that "in an internationalizing field linguistic convenience must be considered at the global level" and

"there is a clear advantage in agreeing on a more distinctive term", i.e., mediatization (Couldry 2012: 134).

The scope of mediatization has increased considerably over the years. At its inception, the concept targeted specific processes, especially the mediatization of politics. Indeed, mediatization is perhaps most commonly used to describe the transformation of politics and political communication: It is argued not only that the media have taken on a larger role in the opinion-building process, but also that the media have become the most important arena for politics.

At the end of the 1970s, Altheide and Snow argued that "political life is being recast to fit the demands of major media" (1979: 136) and is, thus, becoming "an extension of media production" (ibid.: 146). Swedish political scientist Kent Asp argued in the mid-1980s that "the political actors have, to a great extent, adapted to the requirements which the mass media place on their coverage of the political world. This tendency to adaptation is called 'the medialisation of politics'" (Asp 1986: 380). Among the examples of this tendency Asp gave were the personification, simplification and polarization of conflicts. Politicians, in their willingness to adapt to the supposed needs of the mass media and their audiences, have become actors on the stage of politics. Asp did not develop his theory further, and he exaggerated the transformation of politics. Theatrical elements are not an innovation of the modern mass media; these elements have been part of politics for a very long time.

According to Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999: 250), "mediatized politics is politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media". Compared to the neutral term 'mediation', 'mediatization' thus implies that the mass media themselves are becoming *a* or perhaps *the* main political institution. However, the relations between politics and the media may be much more complex than this, as was already pointed out by Mazzoleni and Schultz (ibid.: 258-260). Whereas much of the discussion on mediatization and politics has focused on the increasing autonomy and institutional power of the media (e.g., Hjarvard 2008), Reunanen et al. (2010), for instance, have outlined a more nuanced approach of mediatization for empirical analysis, focusing on the interplay between media and politics at the microsocial level. They argue that the study of the mediatization of politics should take into account the particular political culture in which the interaction between decision-makers and the media takes place.

Observations concerning the entanglement of politics and media resonate with current discussions of mediatization. However, instead of focusing on the relationship between politics and media, many media researchers today use the concept to refer to a much more general process of social change. Mediatization has become an ambitious umbrella concept that targets the society and culture as a whole: "In general, the concept of mediatization tries to capture long-term processes of the interrelation between media change on the one hand and social and cultural change on the other" (Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby 2010: 223). Not all advocates of mediatization assume that the media constitute the dominant center of the social and cultural world (see e.g., Krotz 2007). But they agree that the media have become increasingly important or even decisive for all social and cultural spheres and institutions (e.g., Krotz 2009: 24; Hjarvard 2008: 105; Hepp 2009: 141). Indeed, some mediatization theorists argue that mediatization should be understood as a "meta-process" (Krotz 2007) "on par with other major societal change

processes such as modernization, individualization and globalization" (Strömbäck and Esser 2009: 208). In other words, advocates of mediatization challenge social scientists and theorists to acknowledge the centrality of media-based developments for analyzing social change. In some formulations, the concept even refers to a "new social condition" in which the "media increasingly transgress the whole culture and society" so that "everything gets mediated" (Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby 2010: 224).

At a descriptive level, it is tempting to subscribe to the idea of mediatization. Different means of communication have become more omnipresent in advanced industrial countries. The emergence of the Internet and various social media has made producing and circulating media content relatively easy. The technological possibilities offered by different media are more diverse than before. The media are more mobile than ever, an organic part of everyday life for more and more people, and may affect such highly specialized activities as communicating science and technology (Väliverronen 2001). However, beyond recognizing such ordinary features that give much prima facie credibility to the existence of a general mediatization process, the exact theoretical-analytical status of the notion remains unclear. The question of whether mediatization has already become a paradigm that offers its representatives a theoretical problematic or a set of presuppositions, questions and interpretations can be raised. Although mediatization has attracted considerable interest, there is no unified understanding of the concept even by its advocates.

Sensing such difficulties that threaten to undermine the usefulness of mediatization, several scholars have attempted to give it a more precise analytical status. First, although the advocates of mediatization understand it as a concept that offers a 'key' to making sense of social and cultural changes, researchers differ regarding how much importance and autonomy they give to the media as technologies and institutions that explain such changes. On one end are researchers who propose that the power of the media over other institutions has increased, to the extent that the latter have lost their 'autonomy' and succumbed to a 'media logic' (Hjarvard 2008). At the other end are those for whom the process of mediatization is itself strongly mediated by other processes (e.g., individualization, globalization and commercialization) and social and cultural contexts (Krotz 2007; 2009). Second, the advocates of mediatization have attempted to define different levels of mediatization, for example, by discussing its quantitative and qualitative aspects (Hepp 2009: 142-144) or by breaking down the process of mediatization into more specific analytical dimensions (Schultz 2004). All of these efforts have aimed at making the concept more operational, capable of informing empirical case studies of how mediatization takes place in different contexts. Thus, mediatization advocates are not merely using the concept as a loose descriptive category; they have also attempted to turn mediatization into a more fully developed theoretical program that helps different media researchers organize their work and report their results.

The present article takes a critical look at the advocacy of mediatization as a key concept in media research. What kind of problematic does mediatization offer, and why does it matter? The central question in our article is whether mediatization should be understood mainly as a descriptive term or as an analytical concept. Furthermore, if mediatization is understood as an analytical concept, does it have significance for media studies in terms of discipline status and identity? Does mediatization signify the emergence of a new paradigm and a sense of increasing independence for media studies

as a whole? We will discuss two forms of mediatization theory – strong and weak – by reviewing the work of what we believe are their main representatives. These different forms of mediatization theory suggest that the approach is far from coherent. As we will point out, strong forms of mediatization have been convincingly criticized by those who have argued for a weaker theory of mediatization. Yet the ways in which this weaker form is developed and substantiated raises major doubts concerning the claim that mediatization offers "a concept with which to grasp media and societal change" (Krotz 2009).

'Media Logic': The Strong Form

The starting point for a strong version of mediatization theory is the argument that contemporary societies have become "permeated by the media" (Hjarvard 2008: 105) and that the media have become "part of the very fabric of culture", so much so that they can no longer be conceptualized as being "outside society exerting a specific influence or effect on culture and therefore of individuals" (Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby 2010: 223). This constitutes a "new social condition" (ibid.: 224) that Hjarvard (2008) has called "the mediatization of society". The concept he uses to capture the centrality of the media in social and cultural terms is 'media logic'. This concept is derived from the work of Altheide and Snow, according to whose "elusive" (Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2011: 33) definition

> media logic consists of a form of communication; the process through which media present and transmit information. Elements of this form include the various media and the formats used by these media. Format consists, in part, of how material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behaviour, and the grammar of media communication. Format becomes a framework or a perspective that is used to present as well as interpret phenomena (Altheide and Snow 1979: 10).

Recently, Altheide (2013: 225) has noted that new information technologies have "expanded and complicated the emergence of new mediated forms". Nonetheless, he argues that there is still "a basic underlying conceptual logic" regardless of this new variety, and thus, what is needed today are merely some "conceptual refinements to the comprehensive theory of media logic" (ibid.: 223, 225).

Whereas Altheide (2013: 226) focuses on formats ("drama", "visualization", "narrative forms", etc.) that direct symbolic production, Hjarvard emphasizes "the institutional and technological modus operandi of the media" (Hjarvard 2008: 113) and how it exerts increasing pressure on other social and cultural institutions. Thus, those other social institutions, such as politics, "have become increasingly dependent on the media and have had to adapt to the logic of the media" (ibid.). The same argument is made by Schultz (2004: 89), who notes that politicians and political parties need to "accommodate" to "the 'media logic' of television, i.e., its production routines and presentation formats". Strömbäck and Esser (2009: 206-207) point out that political debates have been changed "to suit the demands of the media", e.g., according to what is considered "newsworthy" by the media, "rather than the demands of the contenders or the electorate". People have started to experience politics through the media, so that people perceive "debates as the media shaped them". The televised presidential debates between John F. Kennedy and

Richard Nixon in 1960 form an important historical reference point for this argument, which later found more support from the analysis of the behavior of leading Western politicians such as Silvio Berlusconi and Tony Blair. All in all, politics is no longer only mediated but "increasingly mediatized" (ibid.: 207). Politics is just one example among comparable trends in sports, religion, entertainment, science, identity construction, consumption, etc. (Schultz 2004: 89; Lundby 2009: 7).

In the strong mediatization theory, the process is strictly linear. Strömbäck and Esser (2009: 216) claim that media content is no longer dictated by "political logic" but by "media logic" that compels political actors from above, so to speak. Thus, we have witnessed, in advanced "post-industrial" countries at least, a tremendous increase in "media influence" (ibid.: 208). Schrott (2009: 47) supports this claim by arguing that "actors" (of whatever sort) "are under pressure to conform to media logic, because they causally attribute power to the mass media to define and interpret socially binding reality". This argument then leads to a claim according to which the media have, over time, become more independent or autonomous in relation to other institutions, and more powerful at the same time. The media here refers not to specific formats or outlets but to an entire system of "production, broadcasting, circulation, and dissemination of symbols, signs, messages, meanings and values" (Strömbäck and Esser 2009: 209).

According to Hjarvard's (2008) historical account, the development of media logic and media autonomy becomes evident when set against a sociological analysis of modernization. From the perspective of a fairly standard liberal-functionalist analysis, he writes about modernization as increasing differentiation, namely, the emergence of institutions that have separate functions in different social and cultural spheres. As for the functional differentiation of the media, in the early modern era, magazines and newspapers established the foundation for the political public sphere, while the entertainment media served cultural functions. However, "in this phase of social development the media were yet to become independent institutions. Instead, they were chiefly *instruments in the hands of other institutions*", especially political parties (ibid.: 117). With the development of public broadcasting and mainstream newspapers, the situation started to change, and the media "became cultural institutions, appealing to all and offering something for everyone" (ibid.: 118). This was strengthened by the gradual professionalization of journalism, which translates into "an adversarial stance vis-à-vis political and commercial interests" (ibid.). For Hjarvard, later structural developments, such as the end of public service monopolies and the deregulation and commercialization of the media from the 1980s onward, are signs of a new autonomy and independence of the media, in the sense that the media started to focus more intensively to their "receivers": "Where media in early days were sender-steered, e.g., steered by particular interests in the days of the party press or by the terms of public service broadcasting concessions, as media institutions they are in large part steered by the interests of their readers, viewers and listeners, their market demand and purchasing power" (ibid.: 119). Interestingly, however, according to Hjarvard, the increasing market orientation of the media is not a sign of decreasing media influence or 'media logic'. He claims that "internalized" professionalism still guarantees that the media are independent of other institutions, and more so today. Thus, "In sum, the media interact with all other social institutions, but from a position of greater autonomy than a pure market orientation would dictate" (ibid.).

The argument (Hjarvard 2008: 120) that the increasing market orientation of the media goes hand in hand with increasing media autonomy and independency is precarious, to say the least. This problem is partly admitted by Hjarvard (ibid.: 126) when he writes that "Inasmuch as the media are influenced by other fields or institutions, we cannot always be certain that observed media impacts imply submission to media logic alone. Occasionally, mediatization will go hand in hand with commercialization or politicization, and whether mediatization is the most dominant force can only be determined by analysis" (see also Altheide 2013: 225 for similar ad hoc caveats). At another point, Hjarvard (2008: 106) notes that the "media are at once part of the fabric of society and culture and an independent institution that stands between other cultural and social institutions and coordinates their mutual interaction". Yet such contradictions do not seem to undermine confidence in the overall "mediatization of society", which is about "the constitution of a shared experiential world, a world regulated by a media logic" (ibid.: 129). For Hjarvard (ibid.: 132), this is further strengthened via the observation that while classic sociologists (Weber, Marx, Durkheim and Simmel) disregarded, for historical reasons, the importance of (mass) media, recent generations of sociologists have become aware of it, and for good reason: "For contemporary sociological inquiry into late-modern society, a theory of the importance of the media for culture and society is no longer an interesting possibility, but an absolute necessity" (ibid.: 133).

The confident claims of Hjarvard (together with Altheide and Snow, Schultz, Schrott, Strömbäck and Esser) regarding the dominance of 'media logic' have been questioned by other media scholars, who in other respects subscribe to mediatization. Krotz (2009: 26) considers the concept of media logic "misleading", as there is no uniform media logic independent of different media technologies (e.g., the logic of television differs from the logic of mobile phones), and technological logics also depend on cultural and social contexts. Lundby (2009: 116) concurs by arguing that "to understand mediatization through a general media logic becomes impossible", as "one has to take into account the specificities of digital media". For Hepp, the problem with "media logic" is that it adopts a "linear view"; transformations of the media must be understood through more "complex approaches" that allow for investigating "the mediatization of certain cultural fields carefully in detail", instead of assuming "a single linear media logic" (Hepp 2009: 140). Couldry offers similar critiques of 'media logic'. Summarizing his thoughts, he writes that the problem with this version of the mediatization argument is that it assumes that societies are easy prey for the power and logic of the media that are supposed to be "working seamlessly across every part of the social space" (Couldry 2012: 136). The position is at odds with "a number of influential sociological approaches" that see "the social" not as unitary but as "differentiated into multiple fields of competition" where no single logic can be overriding (ibid.).

Mediatization as a 'Meta-Process': The Weak Form

If these are the problems associated with the strong version of the mediatization theory, what are the proposed solutions? In general, the critiques presented have resulted in more moderate formulations of mediatization that emphasize the contexts or 'fields' in which the process can be observed and analyzed. These formulations can be called the weak form of the mediatization theory, as its advocates try to de-center the media

or, indeed, any uniform 'media logic', and see mediatization in relation to other major social and cultural processes.

Hepp (2009: 143-144) begins his discussion of mediatization by outlining the notion of the "moulding-forces" of the media. These refer to different media technologies, each of which have different qualities that condition the way in which these media are used and what type of interaction they support. This view has obvious associations with medium theory (especially Marshall McLuhan's and Joshua Meyrowitz's work) and its idea of how each medium has different effects on the society and culture. Thus, for instance, according to Meyrowitz (1985: 308), the main effect of electronic media (radio, television) is that they have "combined previously distinct social settings" by bringing down the social walls that separate people, by blurring what is private and what is public. Although Hepp bases his argument on the same perspective, he (2009: 144) is quick to point out that such "specificities of different media are produced in human acting", and "we have to look in detail how the 'moulding forces' of different media become concrete along […] various dimensions and in different cultural fields".

For Hepp, mediatization is not an overriding social and cultural process, but must be related to three other major social and cultural processes or dimensions, namely, individualization (the requirement placed on individuals to form their identity more reflexively, without the strong guidance of tradition, class or other collective attachments), deterritorialization (the decoupling of culture from its former physical or territorial settings) and the coming of intermediacy (a "culture of instantaneity" or of "telepresence", due to new digital media such as mobile phones; see Tomlinson 2007, who himself uses the concept of 'immediacy' in this context instead of 'intermediacy'). Whatever broad cultural and social effects the increasingly "ubiquitous" media have on whatever context field we are investigating (certain religious events, in the case of Hepp), these effects must be set against the three social, spatial and temporal processes that these media also influence in a dialectical fashion (Hepp 2009: 146-154). Thus, there are no "general assumptions", only "media-related changes *across* various context fields" (ibid.: 154). The main theoretical point that can be derived from Hepp's analysis is that "territorial mass media communication space" is no longer an adequate frame of reference. Instead, we have to understand media cultures as globally complex deterritorialized spaces. This argument offers a media research variant of Beck's (2007) critique of "methodological nationalism" and, more broadly, shares the basic assumptions of cultural globalization theory (see Ampuja 2012: 260-290).

A similar multidimensional outline of mediatization is offered by Krotz (2007; 2009). According to him, mediatization is a meta-process, together with globalization, individualization and commercialization. These concepts, similar to enlightenment and industrialization, "influence democracy and society, culture, politics and other conditions of life over the longer term" (Krotz 2007: 257). Mediatization is not principally more important than the other processes, which have their own logics (ibid.: 259). However, it represents the increasing importance of media-related changes and the cumulative differentiation of "media environments" over time: "mediatization changes human communication by offering new possibilities of communication" (ibid.: 259) so that "media in the long run increasingly become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society, and culture as a whole" (Krotz 2009: 24). Couldry (2012: 137) agrees with Krotz's approach to mediatization and sees that though the media are "an irreducible

dimension of all social processes", mediatization does not refer to "any single logic" and thus allows the analysis of how mediatization operates in different social fields, whose specificities and own logics must also be acknowledged.

The different representatives of the weak form of the mediatization theory share common elements. All representatives see mediatization as a concept that signals a historical transformation in how the media have become more important for the workings of different social and cultural spheres or fields. All conceptualize mediatization as an overarching process that is, however, just one historical "meta-process" among others of comparable status. All integrate ideas from medium theory (the "moulding forces" of media, in Hepp's terms), but in a more or less qualified form. And all share the assumption that social and cultural change is a complex affair, manifesting tendencies and processes that have their own specificities and multiple logics. An eye-catching feature in this respect is also their common adherence to Bourdieu's theory of fields, capitals and competition that lead to the treatment of media as "meta-capital" that is important in the struggles for power and prestige in different social and cultural fields (Couldry 2012: 139ff.; Hepp 2009: 149; Krotz 2009: 33-35).

On the face of it, the weak form of the mediatization theory seems to have avoided overly simplistic assumptions about the power and centrality of the media in contemporary societies; in this sense, the weak form seems stronger than the strong one. However, counterarguments may be raised against the former as well. We feel that although mediatization has appeared as an interesting new topic for media research, accompanied by promises to integrate media and social theory, it has been discussed mostly by its advocates and thus has not been subjected to proper critical treatment. The following points are meant to problematize further some of the key presuppositions behind current conceptions of mediatization.

First, how should 'mediatization' be understood as a historical phenomenon? Here the conceptions vary drastically. Sociologist John B. Thompson's (1995) work concerning the importance of media for the rise of modernity was a precursor to more recent mediatization discussions where it has often been referenced. Thompson operated with the following concept of 'mediazation':

> By virtue of a series of technical innovations associated with printing and, subsequently, with the electrical codification of information, symbolic forms were produced, reproduced, and circulated on a scale that was unprecedented. Patterns of communication and interaction began to change in profound and irreversible ways. These changes, which comprise what can loosely be called the 'mediazation of culture', had a clear institutional basis: namely, the development of media organizations, which first appeared in the second half of the fifteenth century and have expanded their activities ever since (Thompson 1995: 45).

Krotz widens the time scale even more. According to him (2009: 24-26), mediatization is a "long-term process" as it relates to "communication as the basic practice of how people construct the social and cultural world", thus stretching far back in human history, though mediatization also registers a "process of differentiation" where "more and more media emerge and are institutionalized". In the same way, for Bruhn Jensen (2013: 214), mediatization "can be conceptualized as a constitutive component and a necessary condition of social structuration throughout the history of human communication and

media technologies" including "face-to-face communication in […] oral cultures". At the other end of the time scale, Hjarvard (2008: 108) sides with those who are "using the concept to describe the media's influence over areas like politics, consumer culture or science", i.e., for him "mediatisation is no universal process that characterises all societies. It is primarily a development that has accelerated particularly in the *last years of the twentieth century* in *modern, highly industrialized, and chiefly western societies*" (ibid.: 113).

Confronted with these utterly differing views, Couldry (2012: 137) has reacted in an understandable but hardly intellectually satisfying way: He does not find this question particularly important and wants to "leave to one side the debate about whether mediatization can be traced back to medieval times or before, or is best understood exclusively as a modern phenomenon".

Second, for Couldry it is important that "through the concept of mediatization, we acknowledge media as an irreducible dimension of all social processes" (ibid.). This, of course, raises and actually seems to give an all-inclusive answer to the question he did not want to pose: To which societies is he referring with mediatization? Indeed, this question goes back to what is meant by 'media' in the mediatization discourses, in the first place, which is far from clear. It seems that in its current use, the concept of media functions as a 'meta-concept' or, to be more precise, a conceptual displacement for means of communication and the communicative relations that structure it. It thus allows 'communication' to return to its previous wider meaning, while it isolates and valorizes the particular instrumentalist sense that had been ascribed to communication in the form of a regulated system of transmission. In fact, there can be no communication without corresponding 'media' that constitute its 'material or social form', just as there can be no society or culture without communication. Thus, when investigated rigorously and coherently, 'media' turns out to be a concept historically just as broad as that of communication. Potentially, 'media' can include a range of practices and institutions not limited to the transmission of 'information', 'meanings' or 'codes'; in other words, it can include such generalities as language (conceived of as a medium for creating human community), writing or even money (conceived of as the concrete medium for establishing a relationship of exchange of values). As in the case of an 'instrumentalist' or 'technical' – or 'hermeneutic' – concept of communication, the current widespread notions of 'media' or 'mediatization' usually end up obscuring precisely that which they should have clarified, namely, the reality of social practices and their articulations, which underlie the various institutional forms assumed in concrete historical conjunctures.

Third, how should the relationship between mediatization and other "meta-processes" (individualization, globalization, commercialization) be understood? Krotz (2007: 259) writes that "there are complex relations between these four metaprocesses" and "each metaprocess has its own logic of how it develops, but in a capitalistic world all such metaprocesses depend on the economic dimension", so that "commercialization is the basic process providing the stimulus to all action". These propositions are very vague and partly contradictory, and the problems associated with such theoretical formulations are not adequately discussed by advocates of mediatization. In general, they aim for a 'multicausal' explanation of social and cultural change, in order to avoid positions that are too reductionist. However, through such an eclectic synthesis of different processes

whose relation to each other is not discussed further, it is unclear how much explanatory power the concept of mediatization and its reference to media-related tendencies, whether institutional, technological or cultural, ultimately can have. How, for example, should the simultaneous tendencies toward mediatization and commercialization (or individualization and globalization) be theoretically understood? Are they merely "things spinning around other things", as Billig (2013: 122) acerbically puts it? Mediatization is definitely an evocative concept, but due to the ways in which its relation to other 'metaprocesses' is discussed, its theoretical status remains nebulous. The challenge is that "*any* theory which has interesting and bold things to say about social structure and social change" needs to "identify central concepts to 'pick out' purported key mechanisms and forces within a complex whole" (McLennan 1996: 66-67). If the key theoretical concepts are in a loose relation to each other, as in the weak form of the mediatization theory, then one runs the risk of providing loose descriptions of social and cultural change, rather than theoretically coherent analyses or explanations.

Fourth, there is much wavering, in the weak form, concerning the question of what kind of explanatory standing mediatization is supposed to have. What, for example, does a 'metaprocess' in the end refer to, analytically speaking? Krotz (2007: 257) writes that metaprocesses are "constructs which describe and explain theoretically specific economic, social and cultural dimensions and levels of the actual change". Hepp (2009: 140), for his part, considers mediatization loosely as "a frame for researching the relation between media and cultural change".

The problem is that if mediatization is indeed meant to "explain […] levels of actual change", then the concept cannot be merely descriptive, as an explanatory concept would need to signify some causality of its own. However, this is precluded quite explicitly by Krotz and Hepp for whom mediatization itself is strongly conditioned by other social and cultural forces and contexts. In this respect, the way in which the concept is theorized in the weak mediatization argument is quite similar to academic discussions over the concept of globalization (see Rosenberg 2005: 11-15). That is, efforts to elevate the theoretical and analytical status of the concept of mediatization are so heavily qualified that it becomes doubtful whether a "clear argument could emerge at all" (ibid.: 2005: 14). Hepp (2009: 154) writes symptomatically at the end of his argument that "in the best case, mediatization is no more than a concept to link […] different detailed studies to a more general analysis of media power within cultural change". Thus, it seems that whatever forces have thus far been gathered to formulate a "mediatization theory" (ibid.: 140), no such theory actually exists. In other words, mediatization remains a descriptive concept identifying "the process of increasing spreading of technical communication media in different social and cultural spheres" (ibid.: 141). As such, of course, this process can be approached from various theoretical perspectives, which bear no necessary relation to the idea that the media have any independent power (technological or otherwise) to cause and explain that spreading. Consequently, Krotz (and to some extent Hepp) links the "mediatization approach" to various existing theories (e.g. provided by Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Norbert Elias), so much so that it begins to lose whatever autonomy it is supposed to have as a *specific* approach in media theory and research.

Conclusion: Significance of 'Mediatization' for the Disciplinary Identity

The analytical meaning and status of the often-evoked term 'mediatization' remain unclear. However, despite their considerable theoretical differences, the representatives of the strong and weak form of mediatization theory have formed an academically successful and growing venture in terms of publications and conferences. The discourse on mediatization invoked by them will, in all probability, continue to blossom in the coming years because the term seems to have strategic importance for media research. Typically, advocates of mediatization suggest that the media are at the core of social change. Such ideas, potentially at least, increase the importance of media research in the social sciences and social theory at large. In any case, the discourse on mediatization represents an effort that has few historic parallels in media and communication research, as broad social-theoretical concepts are usually developed, for example, by sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists.

Historically, media research has been combined with many other disciplines (e.g., political science, economics, literature, philosophy, social psychology, anthropology and sociology), to such an extent that it has lacked "any clearly defined disciplinary boundaries" and is thus often conceived of more loosely as a "field" (Koivisto and Thomas 2010: 28). Continuous attempts have been made to establish the 'field' as a 'discipline' with its own objects of research, methodology and protocols distinct from those of other social and human sciences. However, these have all run up against the real empirical variety and multiplicity of approaches and perspectives used in research projects. The past decades have witnessed a sharp growth in media research at universities, but this success has been accompanied by concerns that it still lacks clarity and a distinctive character (ibid.: 13-46). The "eventual emergence of 'mediatization' as an integrative concept in the late 2000s" (Couldry and Hepp 2013: 192) promises a new coherence for media studies and "may help us continue the development of our field into a discipline" (Hjarvard 2012: 33). Indeed, as Bruhn Jensen (2013: 218) notes, "it is remarkable how many researchers with distinct theoretical backgrounds and focal interests have converged on the notion of mediatisation over the last decade". This notion seems to offer a way of discussing different aspects of media change in the aggregate, thus offering a vehicle for unifying the different debates within the field. According to Krotz (2007: 256), "worldwide academic communication research needs a common conceptual framework within which to integrate and disseminate this knowledge". For him, mediatization is the most important ingredient of such a framework. Likewise, for Couldry and Hepp (2013: 191), a "fully institutionalized field of communications research has a pressing need for common terms that can orientate researchers from many countries and geolinguistic regions toward shared problems and areas of inquiry". Livingstone (2009) puts forward an even more expansionist idea in her discussion of the importance of the concepts of mediation and mediatization for the recent disciplinary development of the field, noting that "we appear to have ambitions in media and communication not only to defend our terrain but also to expand it into those traditionally held by other disciplines" (Livingstone 2009: 3).

Whereas the theoretical impact of 'mediatization', as well as its potential to evolve into a strong paradigm or research program, "remains uncertain", this does not mean this "commonsensical characterization of contemporary society and culture" (Bruhn Jensen

2013: 218) would be an uninteresting or unimportant topic. For one thing, in the struggles over funding and resources 'mediatization', with its depoliticizing technological and media-centric overtones, can indeed be useful (similar to proven vehicles such as 'information society', 'knowledge society' or 'network society'), though this distracts attention away from contested social relations and their articulations with technological developments that require more comprehensive and less discipline-oriented approaches. Second, research associated with mediatization has, when at its best, produced interesting observations about the ways in which different institutions and social groups increasingly perceive the media as crucial to their activities. For example, politicians and their aides are spending more time considering the ways in which they and their policies are presented in the media and how their media strategies could be improved. However, established political organizations still control political processes in many ways, although they have to adapt to the agendas, timings, formats and vocabularies developed by the media. If political organizations understand how the media operate, they can use this knowledge in their pursuit of political power. Furthermore, political power struggles are overdetermined not only by political institutions and the media but also other institutions and discourses.

A theory of 'media logic' or the enthusiastic promotion of 'mediatization' as a grand concept in the social sciences ends up in a much too simplistic and analytically unsatisfactory perspective. As Billig (2013: 114) points out, media researchers have invested a great deal in 'mediatization' "as a brand label for an approach" without giving due consideration to what the concept "cannot do". The ultimate media-centrism of both the strong and weak forms of mediatization theory prevents their advocates from clarifying theoretically the role of media as agents vis-à-vis other powerful social, political and economic practices and institutions, the complex relations and articulations of which do not necessarily testify to the increasing power of the media in the current historical conjuncture.

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